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President Shelly meets with Deputy Assistant Secretary Fiala



Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly met with the U.S. Department of Labor Deputy Assistant Secretary Gerri Fiala on Feb. 25 to discuss issues surrounding the Navajo Department of Workforce Development. (Photo by Jared King)

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Last week, Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly met with the U.S. Department of Labor Assistant Secretary Gerri Fiala regarding the Navajo Nation Department of Workforce Development.

The meeting took place on Feb. 25 and focused on progress with the Workforce Investment Act grant and the associated expenditures for Navajo Workforce Development.

“We spoke with Assistant Secretary Fiala about the corrective action plan for Department Navajo Workforce Development,” President Shelly said. “What’s blocking the process is the funding distribution through the states.

“I have suggested that funding funnels through the BIA and straight to the Navajo Nation for immediate spending for training and jobs,” he added.

On Feb. 13, President Shelly met with Duane Hall, federal project officer with the Department of Labor on issues facing the NNDWD. Hall was inspecting the Nation’s program and explained the federal process in detail.

“What’s happening is the federal money is given to Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. They figure out how much is for the Navajo Nation and then send it back into the account in Washington so we can send it back out,” Hall said.

The process ultimately delays funding distribution for up to seven months or longer before it finally reaches the Navajo Nation. By the time Workforce Development receives the funding, they have a short timeframe to expend the funds.

Another area was the eligibility requirements for program participants. Hall said the federal government requires that participants are Native American and that they are either low income or unemployed.

The NNDWD mandated that participants were both low income and unemployed. Over income families for the youth program was also reviewed. Five percent over established income levels was allowable, provided participants had an additional barrier to employment or training such as low reading skills.

“There’s barriers in place that the department has imposed on itself. They misread the guidelines and said all youth have to be Native American, low income and have one of those barriers,” Hall said.

Workforce Development has the potential to be an economic development generator, especially through the work experience program.

Employers can provide participants the necessary work experience to compete in the job market and in return, they will have employees working for at least three months with wages provided by Workforce Development funding.

“I think there are some economic development opportunities there,” Hall said.

President Shelly is placing a high priority on the use of technology for the eligibility and intake processes to remove barriers for chapter participants from having to drive to Window Rock for services.

“We need to invest Workforce Development funding in software and high speed Internet access. We also have broadband data centers available on the Nation and we can store the data securely on the cloud,” President Shelly said.

This will help the department and participants to communicate, instead of making a trip down here, he added.

President Shelly is also going to nominate a new representative for the Native American Advisory Council, which meets twice a year with the U.S. Department of Labor.

“It’s a great opportunity to convey your messages,” Hall said of the council. “The secretary believes it’s important the Navajo Nation have representation on the council because of the size of the Nation.”

Hall agreed with President Shelly and said information technology is a critical component for the success of NNDWD.

They need faster Internet speed and good bandwidth, he noted.

“There’s no web-based workforce system in place in the U.S. by any tribe. But when you have remote agencies, you definitely need something web-based,” Hall said. “You can develop that with all the criteria that we need.

“You would be helping out the tribes of the U.S. if you licensed it,” he added.

The other area of concern for the department audit was the cost allocation system. Establishing a plan for the cost allocation system and review of disallowable costs will clear up this area, Hall explained.

The carryover for unspent monies was another issue. Hall said his office has drafted a policy for this and that the NNDWD must immediately begin implementation.

Workforce staff reconciled accounts with Hall and developed caseload limits for case managers working in the five agencies. The next step is development of a plan and implementation.

President Shelly said effective communication is the key to



President Shelly met with Duane Hall from the U.S. Department of Labor on Feb. 13 to discuss the audit of Navajo Department of Workforce Development. They both agreed technology must be implemented. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

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success for NNDWD. He noted that the annual competitive grant funding process for the allocation of federal dollars is an unknown and tribes never know what is going to be funded.

“This is why we’re running around like ants. When you kick the anthill, everybody’s running into each other and asking, ‘What’s the reduction percentage?’ That’s what everybody’s worried about,” he said.

Hall said his week spent with Workforce Development on the Navajo Nation was an eye-opening experience.

“You’re going to get criticism from the feds and any other tribe because you’re so much bigger than other tribes,” he said.

President Shelly ordered that the memorandum of agreement with the states be revised, so funding can reach the Nation faster for immediate spending. He also instructed Workforce Development to invest in broadband access and a web-based platform for intake and eligibility services at the chapter level.

His nomination for a suitable candidate to the advisory council is forthcoming.



Duane Hall, federal project officer for U.S. Department of Labor, said he was assigned to oversee the Navajo Nation Workforce Development for the federal government. He said the size of the Nation is a challenge. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



In addition to the U.S. Department of Labor, President Shelly also met with representatives from Office of Management and Budget, Division of Human Resources and Workforce Development. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

